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***NEW VOTING TECHNOLOGIES PROVIDE
OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE ELECTIONS MORE SECURE***

By: Secretary of State Susan Bysiewicz

Connecticut is affectionately called “The Land of Steady Habits.” Our state does not generally embrace change, especially when there is no emergency or crisis to precipitate the change.

For more than 70 years, Connecticut voters have pulled levers to cast their votes. In all those years, we never experienced widespread voter fraud in connection with the machines – though we have seen an increase in mechanical problems as the machines, which are no longer manufactured, age and breakdown. Still, Connecticut has never experienced the problems that Florida saw in 2000 or Ohio dealt with in 2004.

It is not surprising, then, that some people are leery of introducing new electronic voting technologies in Connecticut. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it, right? Wrong. We should view this change, mandated by the federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA), as an opportunity to open our elections to thousands of new voters and to strengthen protections against election fraud.

HAVA requires that by January 1, 2006, all states have one voting machine per polling place that is fully accessible to persons with disabilities. Our lever machines are not accessible to many people with disabilities. The new machines will allow, for the first time, persons with disabilities and frail elderly voters to cast their ballots independently and secretly, just like an able-bodied voter.

Almost as important as the civil rights component of HAVA is the opportunity for states to strengthen protections against voter fraud. In Connecticut, we are equally committed to both aspects of HAVA. In fact, we are going above and beyond HAVA’s voter fraud protections to provide additional safeguards for Connecticut voters.

One significant protection will be the voter-verified paper receipt (VVPR). After a voter has made her selections, a paper receipt will print out that can be review to ensure that the candidates selected were properly recorded. If there is an error on the receipt, the voter can go back and correct her selections. Once the voter verifies that the receipt accurately reflects her

vote, the voter can officially cast a ballot, and the receipt – which remains in the machine at all times – is stored in the machine.

Under legislation before the General Assembly, the VVPR will also be utilized for auditing and recounts. The legislation calls for a random audit of new voting machines in the 2006 election. Each VVPR will be compared to the machine's internal paper audit trail. The paper audit trail, required by HAVA, is not seen or verified by voters. VVPRs will also be used in any recount.

VVPRs give voters confidence that their vote is being cast and counted accurately. It's a protection that does not exist with our lever machines. Currently, voters are limited to looking at the pulled levers to check their vote. Voters have no way to know that their vote was accurately recorded. During a recent Bridgeport municipal election, a lever machine was opened at the end of the night and, despite being used all day, the machine had not recorded a single vote for one of the races.

In addition to VVPRs and the paper audit trail, my office is requiring all voting machine vendors to equip their machines with three additional security features – a writable CD within the machine, a flash memory card, and another removable memory device.

Some individuals opposed to electronic voting are encouraging the use of "optical-scan" machines. These machines, which operate much like a fill-in-the-bubble test, are not without problems. They are not HAVA-compliant because voters with certain disabilities cannot fill out or cast their ballot without assistance. Optical scan supporters claim that a fully accessible machine does exist, though they acknowledge it is not federally certified. Under Connecticut law, my office cannot purchase a machine that lacks federal certification. Optical scan machines also cost more to purchase, use and maintain and are more prone to tampering. These machines also raise the specter of Florida's infamous "Chads" – if bubbles aren't filled in correctly or read by the machine, our election officials could be forced to make judgments on voter intent.

In the Land of Steady Habits, there is no more important "habit" than going to the polls to choose our elected representatives. Adding one electronic voting machine per polling place, equipped with voter-verified paper receipts, will only enhance, strengthen and protect our most precious habit.

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